



New sights: Communities in Greenland are seeing new possibilities in the face of increasingly melting ice. (Photo: Yadid Levy/Alamy.)

increasing with greater access and fish migrating north from warming seas further south. Numbers of cod, herring, haddock and halibut caught are growing. And increasing possibilities for agriculture are causing some local people to consider whether they could become independent from Denmark and generate enough local funds to be economically viable.

But these local gains come at a global price. Melanie Duchin, expedition leader on the Greenpeace vessel Arctic Sunrise

says that the new north-east Arctic shipping route is not a cause for celebration but for immediate action. And the thaw in Greenland is causing some international concern.

The implications of cargo vessels using the north-east passage in summer puts greater pressure on world leaders to agree major emission cuts at the Copenhagen meeting in December, says Duchin. Balancing local versus global concerns is becoming ever more challenging.

Uncertainty principles

The general elections in Germany have been more open than ever, with five main parties likely to be in the new Bundestag. So what are their policies for science, and the environment? **Michael Gross** reports.

Traditional (West) German politics in the post-war era was very easy to understand. There were the Social Democrats (SPD) on the left, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) on the right, and the much less numerous Free Democrats (FDP) in the middle. Typically, neither of the larger parties had an outright majority, so the small FDP effectively decided who could govern by choosing a coalition partner, a model sometimes described as a tail wagging the dog.

With the rise of the Green Party in the 1980s (later merged with the GDR opposition's Bündnis90) and the emergence of the Left Party (Die Linke) from a merger of the East German PDS and a breakaway group from the SPD, the old dog-wagging order has given way to a new uncertainty, where arithmetic alone predicts that many more combinations should be possible, although there are still some taboos surrounding the Left Party and possible combinations involving green and conservative partners.

After the 2005 election, the larger parties wriggled their way out of the necessity of forming a coalition involving either two smaller partners, or even the unloved leftists, by hitching up together to form the grand coalition headed by chancellor Angela Merkel. The trouble with that is, of course, that the smaller parties find it easier to gain profile against such a middle of the road marriage of the giants, so in this year's election the votes are likely to be spread even more widely than in the previous one, and the political outcome will be even more unpredictable.

Just to add to the confusion, the Pirate Party, inspired by the eponymous Swedish organisation, has gained increasing amounts of attention and a respectable nationwide result at the recent European elections. Their main issues are the changes brought about



Challenge: Will Angela Merkel, campaigning here in Duesseldorf, remain as Germany's chancellor after this month's general election? (Photo: Alex Grimm/Getty.)

by the internet and the necessary adaptations of things like privacy and copyright laws.

With Germany being the strongest economy in Europe and a leader in environmental technology, the results of these elections and of the haggling afterwards will be important not just for Germany, but also for the world at large. As far as science and the environment are concerned, there are interesting differences between the five main contenders, which became obvious when the German Chemical Society, the Physik-Journal, and the Verband Biologie, Biowissenschaften und Biomedizin teamed up to put a whole catalogue of science and education-related questions to leading representatives of each party.

Climate change is a key policy issue ahead of the Copenhagen climate summit in December (Curr. Biol. 19, R537–R539). Germany already has a good track record on this and has pioneered successful measures such as the introduction of feed-in tariffs (FITs) to encourage decentralised production of renewable energy (Curr. Biol. 17, R616). Thus, all parties cite targets that exceed the EU targets. Both the greens and the CDU say they want to reduce carbon dioxide emissions

by 40 per cent by 2020, compared to 1990. The FDP is the only party that mentions flood protection and similar measures as a priority to fight the impact of “unavoidable” climate change.

The free democrats are also in favour of extending the lifetime of the existing nuclear power stations “until renewable energies are available to a sufficient extent or low-carbon coal electricity becomes available on an industrial scale.” Similarly, the CDU wants to use the existing nuclear facilities to bridge the gap until better options become available, while the other three parties are in favour of either the closure program that is already in operation, or an even faster exit.

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Stem cells, cloning, and agricultural biotechnology have been highly controversial topics in recent years. While these issues are often controversial within each party,

there are strong statements against embryonic stem cell research from the greens and the CDU, while the FDP calls for a removal of the date limitation for imported stem cell lines. The leftists agree with embryonic stem cell research until alternative sources become available, while the SPD places more emphasis on the need to encourage research into these alternatives, such as adult or induced pluripotent cells.

GM crops created quite a stir earlier this year when agriculture minister Ilse Aigner withdrew the licence for Monsanto's GM maize MON810, while allowing an experimental project by BASF to go ahead (Curr. Biol. 19, R389). The Green and Left Party are rigorously against GM agriculture, the SPD states that a majority within the party is critical of these technologies, and the CDU emphasizes the need for more research on safety and environmental compatibility.

Whatever the election outcome, Monsanto is likely to face opposition, while climate change activists and renewable energies will probably find support from the next government.

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